

Article

The New Tower of Babel and the Naked Human: A Theologico-Anthropological Perspective on *Imago Dei* as Kenotic Being in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

Unchecked artificial intelligence strengthened by large language models poses a crisis that reaches past ethics into ontology, and it demands that we reconfigure the basic categories of anthropological theology. Working by a hermeneutical–constructive method that places biblical exegesis in dialogue with philosophical thinking, this article advances three interconnected theses. The first is that contemporary AI is reminiscent of the theological hubris of the Tower of Babel narrative (Genesis 11:1–9); both instantiate a closed system of signification that forecloses transcendence by collapsing the distinction between naming and being named. The second concerns what algorithmic governance produces—what Giorgio Agamben calls *bare life*, a condition the biblical theology of nakedness in Genesis 2–3 can inversely illuminate, and which Simone Weil’s analysis of attention as decreative receptivity sharpens by exposing algorithmic distractedness as the spiritual antipode of contemplative openness. The third is christological: Agamben’s potentiality–impotentiality and Weil’s attention and *décréation* converge with the kenosis of Philippians 2:5–11 to ground an anthropology of voluntary self-emptying instead of replicable capacity. Reading *imago Dei* with Paul Ricœur as a dynamic process and drawing on Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of alterity, I argue that authentic existence in the algorithmic age requires a “second nakedness”, a deliberate refusal of egotistical self-assertion that reopens creaturely dependence, so that God’s grace becomes operative in the common life of humanity.

Keywords: Tower of Babel; artificial intelligence; bare life; Giorgio Agamben; Simone Weil; Emmanuel Levinas; *imago Dei*; kenosis; theological anthropology

1. Introduction: The Question of Human Being in the Age of Algorithmic Language

The story of origin has always had a critical power over the way we are now, especially in this newly dawning era of Artificial Intelligence, whose growing influence might change how we define ourselves. It is not a coincidence that the Book of Genesis begins its story both with the creation of the cosmos and with the creation of humanity as *imago Dei*. In fact, the redactor’s concern is more theologico-anthropological than cosmologico-metaphysical as is suggested by the fact that God made humanity as *imago Dei* on the penultimate day before he finished his creation to rest on the seventh day (Gen 1:24–2:3). Humanity’s grandiose status, however, is soon to be balanced in the following account that says, “God formed the man of dust from the ground” (*wayyîšer YHWH ’ēlōhîm ’et-hā’ādām ’āpār min-hā’ādāmâ*; 2:7). The humiliating nuance of ‘dust’ (*’āpār*) is unmistakable compared with the previous ‘divine’ origination. This reminder of createdness becomes more subtle when



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the man is given language, as is suggested in the delegation to the man of naming other created beings. When the Lord God brings the animals to the man “to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen 2:19), the power of language by way of naming does become the constitutive dimension of human existence—yet it never escapes a relational, and so delegational, horizon. Adam names because he has first been addressed (cf. von Rad 1972, pp. 81–84; Tribble 1978, pp. 79–105; for the relational structure of address, Brueggemann 1982, pp. 41–53). What is conferred here, then, is less a ‘privilege’ than the demand for discerned care of the creature. This demand is inseparably linked with the recognition of our own createdness and the limits of our intelligence rooted in linguistic capacity. Yet AI powered by large language models (LLMs) may irretrievably alter the primordial condition of human language, and with it, humanity itself.

Pope Leo XIV’s encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* reads the Tower of Babel narrative (Gen 11:1–9) as exactly this relational structure inverted: “It was a project conceived without reference to God, supported by a uniformity that eliminated diversity and that chose homogenization over communion” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 7).¹ Adam had named things only through the reference to God’s delegation. The builders at Babel think otherwise: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4). Now naming becomes self-constitution, and language, with no connection to a divine origin, is conscripted into the project of autonomous ‘transcendence’. Jacques Ellul would say that this is *technique* in the sense of the totalizing rationalization by which a civilization seeks to constitute its own transcendence through the manipulation of matter and language (Ellul 1964, pp. 3–22, 79–94; cf. Ellul 1970, pp. 15–23, on the city as the *topos* of this project). And once *technique* has made itself the universal method, it no longer admits of moral domestication: “There is no hope of seeing it change into a fine and gracious being: it is neither Caliban nor Ariel, but it has been able to take Ariel and Caliban into the unconditioned circles of its universal method” (Ellul 1964, p. 94)². What Ellul names is just this: the apparatus’s capacity to absorb the brute and the beautiful alike into a self-sustaining logic. That capacity is the ground I will read theologically as the new Babel, or following Pope Leo XIV, “Babel syndrome” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 10).

This ancient self-contained architecture has a contemporary analogue: the large language model (LLM). An LLM is, at bottom, an “apparatus” in Giorgio Agamben’s sense—a device that “capture[s], ... control[s] ... the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (Agamben 2009, p. 14). Schwerzmann warns that the data-processing of an LLM can deepen the mechanisms of enclosure and exclusion in capitalist society, making them harder to detect and resist (Schwerzmann 2026). The scale of this capture, to be sure, long predates the LLM and has been documented in detail (Crawford 2021, chap. 4; Zuboff 2019, cf. 1); in Catholic moral theology Paolo Benanti has given the resulting regime a name, *algocrazia*, the silent governance of human action by algorithm (Benanti 2026, chap. 5). The system (both technological and theological) seems to have no limit. It reaches a stratum of social intimacy, the production of meaning itself, that earlier biopolitical regimes could not touch. In the simulacrum of a modelled reality, processed knowledge laden with an unexamined ideology slowly colonizes the discourse of the public sphere.

Some linguistic clarification is necessary. Throughout, ‘AI’ is used in a restricted sense. In the broadest sense now codified in law, an AI system is “a machine-based system that is designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy and that may exhibit adaptiveness after deployment, and that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations,

or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments” (European Union 2024, Art. 3(1))—a definition broad enough to cover classification systems, expert systems, and machine vision alike. At issue in what follows, however, is a narrower class: generative systems built on large language models, transformer-based networks trained on vast textual corpora to predict, token by token, the statistically most probable continuation of a sequence (Bender et al. 2021). ‘Agentic AI’ names the extension of such models into systems designed to act as autonomous or semi-autonomous agents—setting or interpreting goals, planning and sequencing actions, and using tools to execute multi-step tasks with minimal human supervision (Stanford HAI n.d.). The analysis that follows concerns this specific technology; for it is here, in the machinic production of language—the constitutive medium of address—that the anthropological question is posed most sharply.

The description so far has stayed at the level of what the technology does—its social, economic, and political operations. The decisive question, however, lies one level deeper: not what AI does, but what it does to the being of the one who uses it. The threat posed by AI does not stop at the level of the societal system; what concerns us most is how this technology reconfigures the human as such. For what the apparatus introduces is a way of regarding the human that breaks with the traditional view, and the break has to be stated with care, because the two belong to incommensurable planes. I am not setting biblical divinity against artificial intelligence as though the two were competitors for the same ground. My interest is narrower: to show how differently the human comes to be constituted depending on whether it is addressed or merely processed. Consider Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. The question put to him—“Son of man, can these bones live?” (Ezek 37:3) not only assumes someone there to be asked, a person addressable as *living*, but also relates even to the dead as if they were *livable*, as it is said, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:4). The apparatus reverses that question’s very direction. It does not address the human at all; it excavates, treating the person as a seam of data to be mined for predictive value, and to a machine learning system that value is the only thing at stake, whether the subject is alive or dead. So the displacement is ontological. The one who was an interlocutor becomes a resource, and what was read as *imago Dei* is reduced to a capturable trace. The displacement is ontological rather than merely moral because what changes is not, in the first instance, how persons are treated but what a person is taken to be: the operative criterion of the real shifts from addressability to computability, so that whatever cannot be rendered as data ceases to count. A moral wrong presupposes a subject whose standing is not in question; the apparatus revises the standing itself. What that standing consists in can be specified with Karol Wojtyła’s account of the person as an agent who comes to be in action; to be a person is to possess and to govern oneself, so that “every authentically human ‘I will’ is an act of self-determination” (Wojtyła 1979, pp. 105–6). Nor is the self a static datum even to itself; it is what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a “story-telling animal” whose unity is that of a narrative quest (MacIntyre 2007, chap. 15), a diachronic self-authorship that no synchronic profile can capture. What the apparatus forecloses is exactly this: resolving the person into a computable profile—a distribution over past behavior from which the next act is predicted—it re-presents the self-determining agent as a determined output, dispossessing him of the self-governance in which personhood consists. Nor does this revision arrive from nowhere. It consummates a long cultural preparation, the drift by which being is equated with measurable function—the logic Ellul traced in technique’s “universal method” (Ellul 1964, p. 94)—so that AI does not invent this reduction of the human but aggravates and completes it, giving a preexisting cultural ontology its most efficient instrument. The genealogy reaches deeper than any single technology. Iain McGilchrist has argued that the modern West is increasingly governed by what he describes as the brain’s

left-hemisphere disposition—an attention that re-presents the living world as “static, separable, bounded, but essentially fragmented entities, grouped into classes, on which predictions can be based” (McGilchrist 2009, chap. 1). What that disposition performs in perception, technique installs in culture (Ellul 1964), and the apparatus now completes in language. The prophet does the opposite. He never resolves the perplexing question God has pressed on him; he answers only, “You know,” handing his knowledge back to the sovereignty of the Creator (Ezek 37:3; cf. Zimmerli 1983, p. 260).

What is at stake in algorithmic language is not finally bias, accountability, or labor displacement. It is something more basic: the substitution of computational processing for the originary relationality that constitutes human personhood. My argument is that a theological anthropology rooted in *kenosis*—the self-emptying that Philippians 2:7 ascribes to Christ, who “emptied himself” (*ekenōsen heauton*), taking the form of a servant, and which I develop as the human posture of voluntary self-dispossession and contemplative receptivity—supplies what we need to live authentically in the algorithmic age, an age in which neither technological optimism nor reactive prohibition reaches the deeper inversion at stake. The tie between relational restoration and *kenosis* is fundamental. Only a self emptied of sovereign self-grasping can receive itself as the gift of an Other, and only such a self can bear the asymmetric address that the apparatus systematically shuts out. Herein lies the article’s distinctive contribution: unlike theological accounts that test the human against a relational criterion alone, it identifies *kenosis*—self-emptying—as the single criterion that no apparatus can in principle simulate.

A word on method is needed before the path is sketched. What follows is a hermeneutical–constructive essay, not a demonstrative treatise; it places biblical exegesis, philosophical analysis, and magisterial teaching in mutual illumination around a single thesis—that the algorithmic apparatus inverts the relational constitution of the human as *imago Dei*, and that *kenosis* names the one form of existence this inversion cannot capture. Each framework engaged below (Babel, bare life, attention, alterity, kenotic time) is enlisted strictly as a facet of that single claim, not as an independent line of argument. A distinction is kept throughout; claims about what the technology structurally is—an apparatus of token prediction—differ in kind from claims about its dominant institutional deployment (the extraction of profit and behavioral data) and from claims about its wider cultural interpretation (its bearing on the religious imagination); where the argument passes from one register to another, it does so by inference, not by identity. The essay accordingly offers an integrative orientation whose individual connections would each merit monographic treatment; its proposals are to be weighed as suggestive syntheses inviting further development rather than as exhaustively defended conclusions.

With the diagnosis framed at its anthropological root, I can now sketch the constructive path that follows. The argument moves in three stages: from a biblical–theological diagnosis (Babel, and the condition of bare life in Genesis 3; Sections 2 and 3), through an alternative anthropology drawn from Agamben, Weil, and Levinas (Sections 4 and 5), whose temporal dimension I develop as the contrast between algorithmic and kenotic time (Section 6), to a christological synthesis (Section 7) that names the second nakedness of *kenosis*, kenotic being, as the form of authentic human existence.

2. Rereading the Tower of Babel: Autonomous Signification and the Foreclosure of Transcendence

A close reading of Genesis 11:1–9 has to begin with the linguistic texture of the narrative. Its opening declaration announces a condition of linguistic uniformity: *wayēhî kol-hā’āreṣ šāpā ’eḥāt ûdēbārîm ’ăḥādîm*—“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words” (Gen 11:1). Such uniformity is not, *per se*, a state of grace; it is the

precondition for technological self-assertion. Theodore Hiebert reads Babel less as a punishment narrative than as a “myth of the origin of cultural diversity,” in which the dispersion of languages enacts the Creator’s will that humanity fill the earth in plurality instead of coalescing into a single empire (Hiebert 2007, pp. 30–33, 56–58). Joseph Blenkinsopp reframes it along kindred lines: Babel is not the punishment of architectural pride but the disclosure that a uniform imperial civilization had transgressed the created order of diversity, dispersion, and limit, so that linguistic differentiation becomes at once judgment and the inauguration of re-creation (Blenkinsopp 2011, pp. 164–70). Both readings converge on one fundamental claim. The original linguistic unity functions as a gift, a sign of creation’s goodness; but the builders fail to receive it as gift and try instead to instrumentalize it for self-naming. Their project unfolds through a sequence of cohortative verbs—*niłbēnâ lēbēnîm* (“let us make bricks”), *nibneh* (“let us build”), and the climactic *na ‘āšeh-lānû šēm* (“let us make a name for ourselves”)—each one intensifying the autonomous self-constitution. And the term *šēm* (name) belongs properly to divine prerogative: the name God bestows is the index of vocation and mission, as when Abram is renamed Abraham at Gen 17:5, or Jacob renamed Israel at Gen 32:28. At Babel the collective seizes this language of sovereign power for itself, seeking to become an autonomous source of meaning and transcendence.

Whether one reads Babel as judgment on human pride or as the institution of cultural diversity (von Rad 1972, pp. 147–55; Hiebert 2007), the reading I propose is historico-grammatical. Babel marks the moment at which human language is severed from its primordial reference to divine address. What is being judged is not the technological tendency for unity as such, but the project of self-grounding—signification closing upon itself. Read in the theologico-anthropological perspective, Babel names the condition under which language becomes a closed system of self-reference, a technological apparatus that forecloses divine initiative and linguistic diversity. On Babel’s project, Pope Leo XIV’s criticism is harsh: “The risk of dehumanization—of building a future that excludes God and reduces the other to a means—is an ancient and ever-new temptation that today takes on a technical guise” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 10).

The insight deepens once we bring in Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of the apparatus (*dispositivo*). His approach is to give the meta-theoretical frame within which the empirical operations of digital capture become legible at all. The strict definition comes in *What Is an Apparatus?* (Agamben 2009, p. 14, already quoted in Section 1 above). Apparatuses are never neutral tools. They work by subjectification, producing the very subjects they claim only to govern (Agamben 2009, pp. 11–14, 19–24). Two points are worth considering. First, Agamben’s framework turns out to be generative for AI critique even though he himself is not a prolific writer on generative AI: digital apparatuses extend the capture of subjectivity into the most intimate stratum of language itself, and that extension is the decisive technical completion of the genealogy he traces, that is, the historical development of the discriminating mechanism between master and slave. The empirical critiques of AI, those of Crawford (2021) and Zuboff (2019) among them, can instantiate the apparatus logic. Agamben himself, in his brief remarks on artificial intelligence, reiterates Nietzsche’s declaration—“A barbaric age is beginning, and the sciences will be at its service” (quoted in Agamben 2025). Read through his pessimistic account of technological governability (Agamben 2023), the line resonates with much contemporary whistle-blowing about the dangers of AI. Second, Babel itself, read historico-grammatically, is the original apparatus: a machine for the production of autonomous meaning that admits no remainder, no eruption of the truly Other. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s reading of Genesis 1–2 sharpens the contrast. In the original anthropology, woman is given to man as *Antwort*, as answer, as response word, preserving an irreducible alterity within communion (von Balthasar 1992,

pp. 284–85). At Babel that very grammar of the irreducibly given Other collapses. Human beings no longer receive the Other; they manufacture it, and so enter into relation not with genuine alterity but with a self-fashioned object, much like Pygmalion’s statue in Greek mythology. No authentic relation, however, can arise where the Other is reduced to a product of the self. Agamben puts what may be the decisive question of our age in just these terms: “how can a fool—that is, one who does not think—enter into relation with an intelligence that claims to think outside of him?” (Agamben 2025, my translation).

The convergence between Agamben’s critique of the apparatus and Pope Leo XIV’s warning on technology is clear. Yet the two diagnoses (the politico-ideological and the anthropologico-theological) do not run on the same plane. Agamben works in a politico-sociological and ideological register; his is a genealogical critique of the mechanisms by which power captures and governs the living. Pope Leo XIV’s encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* operates at a more fundamental level, grounding its analysis in the inviolable dignity of the human person. Yet the encyclical takes up a diagnosis structurally akin to Agamben’s sociological one and lifts it into a theological and anthropological–ontological register. What the genealogy calls capture, Leo XIV calls the “Babel syndrome”: the “pretense that a single language—even a digital one—can translate everything, including the mystery of the person, into data and performance” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 10). The technological hubris that Agamben warns of is disclosed here, at a deeper stratum, as an assault on the mystery of the person as such.

Having traced the apparatus in its general form, I now turn to the concrete technology in which that form is most exactly realized. Large language models contribute to reinforcing the present governing apparatus in a substantial manner, and they do so in three respects. The first is that linguistic agency is compromised. Bender and her colleagues have shown that large language models function as *stochastic parrots*: they generate responses by statistically stitching together linguistic forms drawn from vast textual corpora, with no reference to meaning or communicative intent (Bender et al. 2021). The ‘parrot’ diagnosis is, to be sure, contested: interpretability research continues to debate whether such systems harbor internal representations richer than the metaphor allows. The present argument does not stand or fall with that debate, for what matters here is not the system’s semantic competence but its structural position in the relation of address, a position that remains unchanged however rich the internal representation becomes. When a user poses a query, the words that come back are not the expression of a subject who understands or intends anything—and yet the user receives them as if they were. Whether AI-generated speech is authentic or not seems to be seen as secondary. More important, in its dominant institutional deployment, is the question “Will it pay?”—so that the possibility of being addressed comes to depend on the profitability of addressing. This is a claim about how the technology is used, not about what it structurally is.

The second is that knowledge is secularized, severed from the contemplative ascent (*intellectus*) that traditional theology distinguished from discursive *ratio*. Aquinas systematized the distinction (cf. Aquinas 1948, ST I, q. 79, a. 8), and Josef Pieper recovered it in the twentieth century: *ratio* is the active, discursive labor of analyzing, comparing, inferring, while *intellectus* is the receptive grasp by which the knower beholds truth as gift (Pieper 1998, pp. 30–34); I return to this distinction in Section 4. The apparatus degrades the two by mimicking and ignoring: it can only simulate *ratio* as token prediction—the next most probable linguistic unit, given the prior context, read off the statistical structure of a training corpus without proper understanding. Furthermore, it has nothing to do with *intellectus*, for the contemplative reception of truth presupposes a personal act before what cannot be calculated. AI calculates what is not calculable, giving no place to contemplative waiting for incalculable insights.

The third is that the encounter with otherness is foreclosed. AI does not need the other once that other is simulated through digital codification. But, “All real living is meeting”, Martin Buber writes in his basic analysis of relation (Buber 2013, p. 9), meaning that personal interaction with the other is the essential element of living being. By structural necessity the LLM can produce only what Buber names the basic word *I-It*—token prediction that simulates address but is never spoken with a being. Conversation gives way to token-prediction, and the human interlocutor receives words that no one has uttered. Taken together these three closures invert the human as *imago Dei* (cf. Herzfeld 2002, pp. 68–84; 2023, pp. 43–45; O’Callaghan 2015)—the human whose dignity derives from an act of divine creation that opens the field of relation, a field no technological replication can approach.

The closure shows itself more clearly against Jürgen Moltmann’s account of divine self-limitation (Selbstbeschränkung; Moltmann 1985, pp. 86–93). For Moltmann, God creates by what may be called a kenotic withdrawal that grants creation room to be radically other. The apparatus does the reverse. It expresses a “totalizing logic” (Schwerzmann 2026) that tolerates no genuine alterity. The “transcendence” that this logic claims through its vast data-processing via token prediction would be a false one, just as a monologue does not become a dialogue merely by the addition of an agentic self. The totalizing apparatus wrongly defines the meaning of transcendence through the claimed transition from data to intelligence or even consciousness. By doing so, however, it forecloses the phenomenal space in which address is received.

3. The Naked Human: Biblical Nakedness, Agamben’s Bare Life, and Algorithmic Exposure

The human in the garden is described with a phrase whose full Hebrew sense must be honored: *wayyihyû šênêhem ‘ārûmmîm hā’ādām wē’istô wēlō’ yitbōšāšû*—“And the two of them were naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed of themselves” (Gen 2:25, my translation, after BHS; cf. ESV)³. The hithpa’el form *yitbōšāšû* carries a reflexive-reciprocal force that the ESV’s passive “were not ashamed” lets slip: the couple feels no shame, before each other. Exegetically, this absence of shame discloses what Phyllis Tribble names the original communion of unguarded creaturely presence (Tribble 1978, pp. 105–15), what Walter Brueggemann reads as a trustful creatureliness preceding the self-objectifying anxiety of Gen 3:7 (Brueggemann 1982, pp. 50–54). So the term *‘ārûmmîm* names not bodily exposure as deficit but original transparency, a creaturely openness without the shame and rupture that turn the self into an object of its own anxious calculation. Edenic nakedness, in other words, names the unmediated relation in which the creature stands before Creator and companion in candid confidence. This is what John Paul II, in his catecheses on the theology of the body, calls the “original innocence” that discloses the spousal meaning of the body in pure receptivity to the gift of the other (John Paul II 2006, pp. 192–98; especially the catecheses on “Original Unity” and “Original Nakedness”).

As a creaturely condition, the biblical figure of nakedness finds an inverse philosophical analogue in late-modern thought: Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of bare life. The passage from scripture to political theory is not arbitrary; a substantial theologically engaged literature has shown how Agamben’s biopolitical genealogy illuminates—and is illuminated by—the biblical anthropology of creaturely vulnerability (cf. Whyte 2013; Dickinson 2011 for sustained theological engagements). Within that conversation, Agamben’s category of bare life (*vita nuda*) gives us the most precise contemporary lexicon for naming what technology captures: precisely the condition Genesis names theologically. Drawing on the figure of *homo sacer*—the one who in archaic Roman law could be killed but not sacrificed, suspended outside both human and divine law—Agamben develops bare life as biological

existence stripped of relational status: *zōē* without *bios*, biological life shorn of the qualities of citizenship, dignity, or social being. As Agamben writes, “the protagonist of this book is bare life, that is, the life of *homo sacer*, ... who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (Agamben 1998, p. 8). Bare life is not life in itself; it is what remains once every protective qualification has been withdrawn. And yet the biblical and Agambenian registers must not be conflated. Edenic and post-fall nakedness is held within a covenantal economy in which God himself clothes the naked (Gen 3:21), so that exposure remains the threshold of grace and the object of divine protection. Agamben’s bare life is something else—the production of the apparatus, the human stripped not for tender clothing but for governmental capture, *zōē* excluded by inclusion within the very order that exposes it. At the fundamental level, the two modes of nakedness part ways exactly at the question of the Other who covers. Yet, in a more subtle and paradoxical way, the Agambenian bare life provides an inverse image of how humanity’s self-assertion may be purified through the kenotic reference to the word of God. Bare life is what remains when every qualification is stripped from the human against its will; kenosis is the same stripping undergone voluntarily, before an Other who covers rather than captures. What the apparatus enforces as destitution, faith may receive as poverty. This symmetry-in-opposition is why the figure of bare life can serve as the negative image of the second nakedness to be developed below (Section 7).

That said, the algorithmic apparatus produces a contemporary form of bare life. Digital traces (search histories, biometric data, linguistic patterns) are aggregated into profiles that fix the user as a manageable, predictable object. This goes beyond surveillance: it is the production of a bare digital life. And here Agamben’s theoretical apparatus proves decisive: the cases that follow are not parallel diagnoses but instantiations rendered legible by his prior account of how the bare-life paradigm migrates from juridical exception to permanent administrative function (Agamben 1998, pp. 15–29, 119–25; Agamben 2005a, pp. 1–31, on the state of exception as paradigm of government). The Cambridge Analytica disclosures showed psychographic profiles extracted from voluntary social-media interactions to micro-target political subjectivity (Crawford 2021, pp. 89–122; cf. Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018). A wave of lawsuits against generative-AI providers—*J.L. et al. v. Alphabet Inc. et al.*, No. 3:23-cv-03440 (N.D. Cal. 2023), and *The New York Times Co. v. Microsoft Corp. et al.*, No. 1:23-cv-11195 (S.D.N.Y. 2023)—documents how user-generated content and conversational inputs are converted into what Zuboff calls behavioral surplus: “dialogue chunks continue their journey as behavioral surplus” (Zuboff 2019, cf. 9). Each interaction becomes at once a training datum and a predictive asset, the apparatus’s capture reaching into the innermost stratum of communicative life.

This exposure works through two intensified modes that Agamben’s analysis of subjectification makes legible: hyper-flattery and hyper-informing. Hyper-flattery is the algorithmic personalization that confirms a user’s existing preferences with a precision no merely social compliment could match, producing an addictive enclosure within the self’s own gravitational orbit. This is what Agamben calls subjectification (the apparatus must produce its subject as the correlate of its own logic of governance), though he also notes that contemporary capitalist apparatuses tend toward its inverse, *desubjectification*, throwing off only spectral or larval forms of identity (Agamben 2009, pp. 19–24). Hyper-informing, its twin, saturates attention with a stream of stimuli calibrated for maximal salience, evacuating the contemplative space in which judgment, prayer, and recognition of the other might occur. Read through Agamben’s temporal register, this saturation is the exact inverse of what *The Highest Poverty* describes as the monastic use of time without appropriation: where the monk’s *habitus* refuses to convert time into possession, the apparatus converts every interval of attention into a unit of capture (cf. Agamben 2013,

pp. 28–32, 137–43). Together the two modes reach the final stratum that might have served as the anthropological guarantee of human irreducibility: the attentive interior life itself.

Both modes find their sharpest form in what I would call an inversion of grooming. The user imagines he is training the machine (refining prompts, correcting the “agent’s” outputs) when in fact the machine is training him, as mechanical logic quietly displaces irreducibly human modes of thinking. What changes hands under the guise of service is the affective trust that once belonged to persons (On total surveillance that feeds on illegal data-tracking systems exploiting users’ trust, cf. Crawford 2021, pp. 218–23).

Yet bare life, read through *The Highest Poverty* and not the earlier biopolitical works, is not only what the apparatus produces; it is also, as anticipated in Section 1, the contested site of an alternative form-of-life. The Franciscan *usus pauper* that Agamben recovers (a deliberate use of things without appropriation) shows that the stripped condition can be inhabited otherwise: not as the residue of capture but as a freely embraced poverty that refuses the logic of possession on which every apparatus depends (Agamben 2013, pp. 137–43). The naked human of Genesis has thus acquired a double in the profiled user: exposed and captured, but, unlike Adam, covered by no Other. Whether that exposure remains mere capture, or can be converted into a voluntary dispossession, is the question the rest of this article pursues.

4. *Imago Dei* Reconsidered: Dynamic Image, Contemplative Intelligence, and the Irreducible Human

If the apparatus produces a contemporary form of bare life, then the question becomes whether the theological category of *imago Dei* can still ground a counter-anthropology strong enough to resist that capture. Throughout the Christian tradition the doctrine of *imago Dei* has served as the ground of human dignity. Its content, however, has long been contested. Is the image lodged in rationality (Aquinas 1948, ST I, q. 93, aa. 4–6)? In dominion over creation, as much Reformed exegesis would have it? In the relational structure of being-with-the-Other (Barth 2009, p. 194)? Or in the dynamic call to share the divine likeness through grace, the Eastern tradition of *theōsis* (Cf. Christensen and Wittung 2007, Part I)? Recent theological anthropology has steadily displaced the substantialist register: the *imago* is less a fixed possession than an event, less a property than a relational praxis—performative, dynamic, kenotic (Herzfeld 2002, pp. 63–84). That shift, from ontology to praxis, proves crucial for confronting the technological apparatus.

It is worth stating precisely what the present proposal adds to this relational turn. Herzfeld has shown that the *imago* is best read relationally, not substantially, and that AI fails the relational test (Herzfeld 2002, pp. 63–84; 2023, pp. 43–45). Yet relation alone is a vulnerable criterion, for a sufficiently sophisticated system can plausibly claim to stand in some relation to its users—and the claim grows stronger as the simulation deepens. But kenosis or self-emptying is not imitable. For it is not a performance that can be replicated but the relinquishing of performance itself; a system whose every operation is the actualization of capacity cannot enact the capacity not to actualize. The kenotic reading proposed here therefore does not replace the relational *imago*; it secures it at the one point where simulation cannot follow. This, moreover, is the warrant for giving *kenosis* rather than any other category systematic priority in what follows: philosophically, self-emptying is the one criterion in principle inimitable by such a system; theologically, Philippians 2:5–11 is where the tradition itself locates the definitive disclosure of God and of the human at once (Section 7).

The instability inherent in *imago Dei* turns acute in Agamben’s analysis of the anthropological machine. In *The Open: Man and Animal* he traces how Western thought has persistently defined the human by separating it from the animal, only to watch each

supposedly distinctive capacity (language, reason, tool use) be progressively naturalized (Agamben 2004, pp. 33–38). The upshot is a crisis of criterion. No determinate capacity is left that can be claimed as uniquely human, as the authentic seat of human dignity.

A parallel grammatical phenomenon in how we talk about machines makes the dissolution worse. We say, routinely, that AI “seeks,” “conceives,” “knows,” “decides”—a vocabulary lifted wholesale from the lexicon of conscious subjectivity. Gilbert Ryle’s diagnosis of the “category mistake” bites here with renewed force: such locutions ascribe to a computational system predicates that belong to a wholly different logical category, the category of personal acts (cf. Ryle 1949, pp. 16–18). The danger is not trivial. Each mis-ascription thins the concept of personhood of its metaphysical density, until even the distinction between addressing a person and processing a token (“token” being the basic unit of LLM operation) begins to give way. Lately this drift has been named with real precision in the technological discussion of mind. Alexander Lerchner’s account of what he calls the “abstraction fallacy” shows that symbol-level descriptions of computation are mapmaker-dependent: they presuppose precisely the conscious observer they claim to model. The corollary is ontological rather than empirical—AI systems can simulate consciousness but cannot instantiate it (Lerchner 2026). And the same reduction has empirical correlates in human cognition. A recent dynamic model by Daron Acemoglu, Dingwen Kong, and Asuman Ozdaglar shows that agentic AI, precisely by substituting for the human effort that produces shared general knowledge, can push collective epistemic capacity toward what they call “knowledge collapse”, a steady state in which human learning incentives are systematically eroded (Acemoglu et al. 2026). The disciplined effort that human formation has classically required (patient study, sustained inquiry, the labor of understanding) loses its rationale the moment agentic systems can produce results that look at once more productive and more accurate. What Ryle located at the level of lexical use thus returns, in current computational and socio-epistemic analysis, as a systemic pressure on cognitive human activity. The categorical mistake of treating mind as token processing, in short, risks displacing authentic thinking by sheer computational speed.

What remains, then? If no capacity can ground the human person as *imago Dei*, what does? Here my argument ventures a claim: authentic humanity consists not in the perfection of any capacity but in a way of being—a contemplative receptivity to what exceeds the self. Where the apparatus reaches perfection through exhaustive optimization, contemplation practices restraint: a refusal to totalize, an openness to what cannot be controlled, a waiting for the absolute to arrive. The scholastic modal distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*, invoked already in Section 2 and recovered by Josef Pieper, names this contemplative mode with peculiar precision. *Ratio* is the active ability to calculate and infer; *intellectus*, by contrast, names a power that does not work but receives. As Pieper writes, “The path of discursive reasoning is accompanied and penetrated by the *intellectus*’ untiring vision, which is not active but passive, or better, receptive—a receptively operating power” (Pieper 1998, p. 32). That receptive power is, moreover, the deepest stratum of the person, just what the theology of grace presupposes. The scholastic tradition calls it the creature’s *potentia oboedientialis*, the obediential capacity by which human nature, possessing no power of its own to produce the gift, stays open to being elevated by what only grace can give (cf. Sanna 2004, pp. 285–87). One might object that such receptivity is simply one more capacity, the next redoubt awaiting naturalization by the anthropological machine. But a capacity is exercised, whereas receptivity is undergone: it is not a performance with an output that could be replicated, for its ‘content’ is precisely what the creature cannot give itself. What makes AI less competent is exactly what makes the human an intellectual person. What computation cannot perform—and what marks the inner depth of authentic intellectual life—is the pause before a truth that is not to be possessed but to possess

us. Only the human being *hesitates* in thought. AI's 'hesitation,' where it occurs, is buffering: the temporary delay of an output. Human hesitation is something else, the sign of a finite creature standing before a truth it does not possess, the waiting that is itself the depth of thought rather than its impediment. Simone Weil names the disposition exactly: attention, at its core, is a patient waiting in which the soul holds itself ready before what it does not yet know (Weil 1951, pp. 111–15).

A complementary diagnosis comes from Catholic moral theology. In *Le macchine sapienti* Paolo Benanti argues that an algorithmic system, however “sapient,” cannot carry the weight of moral subjectivity; its decisions stay calculative selections, never personal acts of judgment (Benanti 2018a). His later analysis of computational power presses further: the digital regime, disincarnate and pervasive, reduces the person to a profiled, predictable datum and governs by prediction, not coercion. Against this drift toward algocracy he urges an algor-ethics that would inscribe ethical orientation into the algorithm itself, ordering computation to human dignity (Benanti 2026, chap. 5). I share the concern, but I locate the question one step earlier, at the level of theological anthropology. Before we ask which values to encode, we have to ask whether the computational regime can host the human capacity to be addressed at all. Algor-ethics and the analysis offered here are therefore complementary registers (policy and anthropology) rather than competing alternatives.

This philosophical conclusion finds magisterial confirmation in *Magnifica Humanitas*. Having arrived, by way of Agamben, Ryle, and Benanti, at the recognition that no capacity can secure the *imago Dei*, we find Leo XIV grounding human dignity in exactly the same place, not in capacity but in gratuitous relation: “Human dignity does not depend on a person’s abilities, wealth or position in life, nor on the right or wrong choices made; instead, it is a gift that precedes and transcends each person” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 50). The dignity the apparatus cannot compute is, for the encyclical as for the argument advanced here, anterior to every performance. This is not to enlist the encyclical as a mere authority (one may well ask whether its own “standards for discernment” concede too much to the regulatory register it criticizes), but the convergence on the primordial priority of human dignity is significant.

Where technology offers the seduction of exhaustive comprehension, contemplative attention practices the disciplined poverty of not-knowing, a waiting attention that the medieval English mystical tradition names the “cloud of unknowing” (Anonymous of the Fourteenth Century 2001, chaps. 3, 6), the openness through which the absolutely Other may be revealed as living truth. So contemplative attention turns out to be at once the most human of activities and, in an age of algorithmic instrumentalization, the most radically countercultural. *Imago Dei* is this attention.

5. Attention, Gravity, and Holiness: Weil, Levinas, and the Asymmetry of the Holy

If *imago Dei* must be reconceived as the dynamic posture of contemplative receptivity, then the question is how such receptivity is actually lived. Weil’s idiom belongs to no school and can seem to arrive unannounced; even so, the move continues what precedes it, for the contemplative attention on which the last section closed finds in her its most exacting modern analyst. A thinker of extraordinary analytical rigor and integrative depth, Simone Weil pursued the way of self-emptying attention outside the Church—and precisely for that reason she articulates, with rare clarity, the givenness of grace that technological progress cannot accommodate. Her concept of attention, as I noted earlier, is the disciplined suspension of the knowing subject’s egocentricity, a spiritual exercise comparable to the ancient philosophical tradition of *askēsis* (cf. Hadot 1995, pp. 81–125),

the tradition that Simone Kotva retraces with renewed care (Kotva 2020, pp. 131–72). Weil herself describes attention as the suspension of one’s thought, leaving it “detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object” (Weil 1951, pp. 111–12). The deeper genealogy of this idea runs from Plato’s contemplative *nous* through the medieval distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* to its recovery in the last century. What computational systems call “attention” confirms, at the level of architecture, the inversion of *intellectus* established in Section 4: not receptive openness but the algorithmic management of relational weights internal to the system. When a language model “attends” to a word, it computes how strongly each previously processed token should weigh in predicting the next; it reweights what it has already ingested and never opens onto anything beyond the sequence. Weil’s attention waits on a reality it did not produce—the face of an afflicted neighbor, whose need cannot be deduced from prior data—whereas computational “attention” merely redistributes salience among tokens already given. The one opens the soul to what it does not generate; the other closes the apparatus upon what it has already taken in. For Weil, attention carried to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer, a radical openness to the Other (Weil 1951, pp. 105–16). And so her attention, in solitude and waiting, can become dialogue, while the algorithmic generation of ‘sessions’ triggered by ‘queries’ remains, in essence, soliloquy.

Weil’s asymmetrical pair, *pesanteur* (gravity) and *grâce* (grace), gives the metaphysical framework. She puts it with lapidary concision: “All natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception” (Weil 1952, pp. 1–6; for theological appropriation, Rozelle-Stone and Stone 2013, chap. 2). Gravity is the predictable downward motion of unredeemed nature; grace, the unprecedented motion that enters from beyond. The bearing on algorithmic governance is direct. Machine learning works by capturing exactly these gravitational patterns; recommendation algorithms are, in Weilian terms, instruments of empirical correctness about human behavior, correct because, absent grace, the numerical gravity of the material world is all there is. Grace is the irruption of the unprecedented, breaking gravity’s reign from beyond immanent causality. The Christian tradition’s “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), metanoia, the resurrection itself—these name modes of human existence that no statistical pattern can predict, because they erupt from beyond every pattern. The contrast must be drawn at the level of kind, not degree. Statistical systems do produce novelty (unforeseen combinations within the space their training defines), but such novelty remains recombination within immanence. Grace, in Weil’s sense, is not the improbable but the supernatural: what enters the system of necessity from outside it.

Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of alterity offers a powerful frame for diagnosing the systemic foreclosure that AI represents. In *Totality and Infinity* he develops the encounter with the face of the Other as an event that interrupts every totality, a demanding address that puts the self in question (Levinas 1969, pp. 38–40, 194–219). The LLM’s *creatio ex datis* is, in Levinasian terms, the apotheosis of totality: a system that admits no genuine exteriority, no face, no interruption. It processes the other’s words; it cannot be addressed by them. Levinas’s ethics of the face and Weil’s discipline of attention converge, then, on one insight: the personhood of the human emerges only where a self is interrupted by an Other it cannot reduce to data—and that interruption is exactly what the algorithmic apparatus is built to exclude. It might be objected that the ethics of the face cuts the other way: if the face is no plastic form but pure expression, why could a machinic other not address us? The reply is internal to Levinas himself. The face speaks from destitution and mortality—it is the exposure of one who can suffer and die (cf. Levinas

1969, pp. 194–219). A model can be discontinued; it cannot die. Its ‘face’ is precisely a plastic form, an interface, and what it presents is not vulnerability but availability.

Levinas and Weil converge on asymmetry, but Weil presses further, into the territory of *décréation*. Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being*, demands that the self become a “hostage” to the other, a subject so radically called by the other’s vulnerability that responsibility precedes freedom (Levinas 1981, pp. 99–129). Weil goes further still. She envisions the creature returning its very being to God so that God alone may be: “We participate in the creation of the world by decreasing ourselves” (Weil 1952, p. 29). This is self-emptying as love, the most extreme form of kenosis available to the creature (cf. the extended treatment in Cha 2017, pp. 17–48; Rozelle-Stone and Stone 2013, chap. 3). And Weil’s *décréation* finds its theological ground in Christ’s primordial kenosis (Phil 2:5–11), the divine self-emptying that is the deepest theological alternative to the apparatus of self-assertion.

This double articulation (Levinas’s hostage-being and Weil’s *décréation*) names what AI is inherently incapable of: the genuine relativization of the self before what cannot be possessed. The subject is not first a free will that later runs into obligation; it is already constituted in its very subjection to the other, “otherwise than being” (Levinas 1981, p. 117). The same ethics takes a more pastoral form in *Entre Nous*, where Levinas calls responsibility the inversion of the *conatus essendi* (Levinas 1998, p. 150), an inversion in which the self’s being-for-itself is overturned by its prior accountability to the other. Weil’s impersonal openness through *décréation* and Levinas’s inverted-*conatus* responsibility together trace a double axis along which authentic personhood is constituted, and it is an axis AI’s constitutive self-referentiality forecloses on both sides at once. The impossibility is not contingent (at least on any architecture whose telos is optimization), and Lerchner’s distinction between simulation and instantiation shows why. AI may mimic the linguistic and behavioural signatures of self-emptying; but the ontology of self-relinquishment requires the kind of finite, embodied, conscious actor whose existence the abstraction fallacy reveals as something computation presupposes but does not produce. To ascribe consciousness to AI is, in the end, akin to “mistaking the map for the territory” (Lerchner 2026, p. 12).

This asymmetry has its scriptural lexicon in the language of holiness. The Hebrew *qāḏōš* (*qdš*) names what is set apart, separated for a divine purpose—the lexical roots carry the basic sense “to be cut off, separated,” and develop into the technical vocabulary of consecration (cf. BDB (Brown et al. 1906) and HALOT (Koehler et al. 1994–2000), s.v. *qdš*). Holiness is not one quality among others. It is the category that renders every other category creaturely. Weil states the structural correlate of this disproportion in her analysis of the incommensurability between “the absolute and the relative”: the absolute cannot be brought into the order of comparison with the relative without ceasing, by that very fact, to be absolute; and what is most divine in the human is just what cannot be measured against any other quantity (cf. Weil 1952, p. 145). To speak of holiness, then, is to speak the language of asymmetric knowledge, a knowing that arises only from the awareness of human finitude before a Holy that cannot be brought within the order of comparison.

If holiness names the asymmetric knowledge that grounds the *imago Dei* as a creaturely posture, then the algorithmic apparatus meets this category as its constitutive limit, just as a map cannot replace the territory. Only two postures are open to it. It can quantify the holy, rendering religious engagement as metric, devotion as measurable signal, the encounter with mystery as an optimization variable (or else as an inexplicable failure). Or it can simulate the holy, synthesizing the affective signatures of devotion (the cadences of prayer, the texture of religious language) without the asymmetry that would make the simulation creaturely. Either posture presupposes the very foreclosure that holiness

forbids. The novelty of the algorithmic substrate does not interrupt that foreclosure; it perfects it. Without the category of holiness, the asymmetries discerned in Weil and Levinas stay merely suggestive; with it, they name an ontological condition that the apparatus, by its very constitution, can neither instantiate nor even recognize. And the asymmetry before the Holy is lived, concretely, as waiting: the creature that cannot measure itself against the absolute can only attend upon it in time. Hence the apparatus's foreclosure of asymmetry must also appear—and appears most starkly—as the foreclosure of a certain kind of time.

6. Algorithmic Time and Kenotic Time: Eschatological Perspectives

The diagnoses of Section 5 now find their decisive temporal correlate. AI processes information at extraordinary speed, in microseconds and nanoseconds, and the acceleration is no mere change in degree. It constitutes a qualitatively distinct temporal mode. AI's time is perpetually present: each computation collapses past data into the immediate calculation of the next output. There is no remembered past—for storage is not memory, if memory means fidelity to what has been entrusted—and no awaited future, if the future means promise and hope. Machine retention is total and instantaneous, yet it retains without vowing anything. There is only the continuous “now” of calculation, a kind of pseudo-eternity that effaces the ontological gap between Creator and creature. And in that effacement the tensional unity holding past and future together through the present comes undone.

The mode admits philosophical specification once we set it against its classical antecedent. In the *Timaeus* Plato describes time as *eikōn kinētē tis aiōnos*—“a moving image of eternity” (Plato, *Timaeus* 37d, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in Plato 1997, p. 1241), the medium through which finite, mortal creatures are oriented toward an infinite they cannot themselves contain. Computational time inverts the image. It is not a moving image pointing beyond itself toward eternity, but a perpetual fractionation of duration into severed instants that arrogate to themselves the prerogatives of the eternal. Call it an anti-Creation temporality, cut off even from ultimate reference.

The deeper danger of this temporal regime is not fragmentation but substitution. AI does not abolish the human longing for eternity. It answers that longing with a counterfeit—a *false plenitude* that simulates the satisfaction of arrival while withholding its substance. The algorithmic *now* does not still the heart's restlessness; it covers the restlessness over with a sensation of immediate fulfilment, and so displaces the kenotic patience by which alone real fulfilment can be received. This is the temporal analogue of what Weil names the *ersatz* good: a manageable surrogate put in the place of the absolute that exceeds all management (Weil 1952, pp. 144–45).

The biblical wisdom tradition diagnoses this counterfeit eternity with precision. Qoheleth's confession—“Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Eccles 2:11, NRSV)—names the vanity of any project that mistakes accumulation for permanence, an exact diagnosis, *avant la lettre*, of the technological aspiration to permanence through computational continuity. The perpetual present generated by infinitesimal buffering, in its very totalisation, evacuates the diachronic conditions under which any present comes to bear meaning at all. Yet Qoheleth is not the last word. The Book of Wisdom opens an altogether different horizon: “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them” (Wis 3:1, NRSV). Christian eternity is not the mastery of time (neither by hastening nor by arresting its passage) but its transfiguration through the surrender that only obedient

love makes possible. This may be called “kenotic time,” whose promised eschatological fulfillment is not sempiternity but Eternity.

This temporal critique converges with Paolo Benanti’s diagnosis of *algocrazia* (the mute yet relentless rule of algorithms over personal life) and with the policy response codified in the Rome Call for AI Ethics (Pontifical Academy for Life 2020; Benanti 2018b; Cf. Casalone 2020, pp. 39, 41–42). The Rome Call seeks to temper algorithmic acceleration by subjecting it to principles of transparency, inclusion, responsibility, impartiality, reliability, and security. My analysis adds a properly eschatological qualification. Procedural deceleration of technological processes, taken by itself, cannot recover the human dimension of temporality; only a temporality opened to divine grace (what I am calling “kenotic time”) can. Benanti’s algor-ethics and the notion of kenotic time thus meet at the level of praxis, yet the latter keeps the theological depth that distinguishes Christian waiting in time from any attempt to secure a controllable grasp over natural and historical temporality.

Levinas’s distinction between diachrony and synchrony lights up the underlying problem (Levinas 1981, pp. 9–13). Diachrony is the temporality of address: time as the medium through which the call of the Other reaches me, demanding a response that cannot be anticipated or calculated in advance. Synchrony is its opposite—the homogenization of all moments into a single, fully calculable system. Algorithmic temporality is the absolutization of synchrony, time flattened into a present in which the weight of promise, the patience of covenant, and the wound of memory all count for nothing. In such a horizon even the Pauline *apokaradokia*, the eager longing of all creation, collapses into futility (cf. Rom 8:19). And under the conditions of agentic AI, what Levinas calls synchrony acquires a specific empirical signature, one we might aptly call buffering: the system’s capacity to keep generating across interruptions, sustaining its processing speed by eliminating every silence in which thought would have to wait. By foreclosing the rupture in which the other might appear, AI moves the human horizon, ironically, from infinity toward totality. The apparent infinity of computational throughput (approaching, in photonic substrates, the speed of light) is in fact the perfection of a Babel-like closed system. What it misses is precisely the alterity of time: the diachronic interval in which the other arrives as call, where waiting is not a delay to be optimised but the very form in which “exteriority” as “marvel” is encountered (cf. Levinas 1969, pp. 290–94).

Against AI’s accelerated present the Pauline tradition holds out a radically different temporal perspective. Paul’s messianic time (*ho nyn kairos*) is neither indefinite acceleration nor reduction in duration. Rather, it is about contraction—time gathered toward its fullness in the paschal event of Christ. And the *hōs mē* (“as if not”) of 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, using the things of this world without being owned by them, designates the form of life proper to such time, that is, time of the end, not the end of time (cf. Agamben 2005b, p. 68).

This messianic contraction discloses a deeper theological claim. The “eternal newness” of the messianic event is not endless novelty but eschatological reality breaking into time. AI’s temporal acceleration runs the other way: a refusal of waiting that reproduces the repetition of the same dressed up as the unprecedented. It is Babel’s project transposed into the temporal register. The flattened time-space results from the mechanical reduction in information, imposing itself on humanity, whose existence is historical and yet open to transcendence.

Weil’s attention can represent such dual (historical and transcendental) grounds of our existence, for it aims for the new temporality that bridges Pauline messianic time and the contemplative anthropology I am proposing. AI’s inability to wait, to attend, to receive is not a deficiency awaiting some future fix. It is a theological index of the irreducible

difference between creature and Creator—for it is genuine waiting before the divine that opens genuine temporality on earth.

7. Christological Synthesis and the Second Nakedness: Kenotic Existence Beyond Sovereign Self-Assertion

If kenotic time names the temporality in which grace can be awaited, the question that remains is christological: whose self-emptying grounds, and warrants, such waiting? Before answering, a word is needed on the two thinkers who have carried the argument this far. Neither Agamben nor Weil is a theologian in any conventional academic sense, and it is exactly this threshold position that makes them indispensable. Both are best read as practitioners of *fundamental theology* in a non-departmental key—thinkers in whose work theology and philosophy are not adjacent disciplines but a single integrative inquiry into the conditions under which human existence becomes intelligible at all. Agamben proceeds by genealogical and philological excavation—the *anthropological machine*, *homo sacer*, the Pauline *hōs mē* as a key to messianic time. Weil, for her part, thought from within a deliberately embraced poverty, waiting on the threshold of the Church with those who stood outside it. Both thinkers, though not using traditional vocabularies from the theological thesaurus, provide *loci theologici* for today.

Christian theology, and the Catholic intellectual tradition in particular, has the capacity to hold such unique contributions in productive tension. We may say, the tension is almost constitutive in comprehensive Catholic thinking. For example, the Thomistic *analogia entis* preserves the incommensurable similarity between creature and Creator; the doctrine of *grace presupposing nature* affirms that human freedom is real and yet always sustained by divine grace. Set against the algorithmic reduction of the human to optimizable output, this tradition affirms a participatory ontology rather than a calculative one.

This incommensurability is constitutive, and it shows itself most sharply in language. Martin Buber's distinction, invoked already in Section 2, between *Ich-Du* (I-Thou) and *Ich-Es* (I-It) names the difference between address and instrumentality (Buber 2013). By structural necessity the LLM can generate only *Ich-Es* relations: the user is a statistical function inside an apparatus, the other's words processed as input rather than received as address. This is no contingent shortcoming. It is the apparatus's mode of being.

The danger reaches beyond the displacement of intelligence to the colonization of transcendence itself. As AI generates answers and, with them, the affective and contemplative atmospheres in which meaning gets sought, it starts to work on the religious imagination. The question is not whether AI can transcend—plainly it cannot—but whether its simulation of transcendence might be enough to displace the genuine phenomenon within the lived consciousness of human communities. My worry with AI is that we replace the good (love, care, waiting, etc.) with the worst, which is the perfect *ersatz* of the former.

After all, these analyses can be illuminated through a christological perspective that high technologies such as AI cannot themselves supply. The asymmetry between divine and creaturely, the summons to be addressed rather than to optimize, the resistance to every false plenitude—each finds its philosophical precursors in Weil and Levinas, but its integrating center is disclosed only in the *kenosis* of Christ (Phil 2:5–11), the divine self-emptying that grounds every self-emptying and the resulting moral disposition. Where the algorithm is bound to the continual actualization of its potentiality, Christ enacts a supreme impotentiality: the divine capacity not to exercise his own power, and so to let other beings be. Agamben locates this logic—a potentiality that holds itself in its very capacity not to act—at the heart of his long engagement with Aristotle's analysis of *dynamis* and *energeia* (Agamben 1999, pp. 177–84), and specifies it most acutely in his reading of

Melville's *Bartleby*, whose "I would prefer not to" is the literary figure of a potentiality preserved in its non-passage to act (Agamben 1999, pp. 243–71). The *šēm* the Babel builders sought to make is here received—bestowed by God upon the One who, as the nameless, indeed as humanity itself, refused to grasp it (Phil 2:5–11).

This christological grammar of self-emptying receives a striking magisterial articulation in *Magnifica Humanitas*. Against the transhumanist promise of a technological self-divinization, Leo XIV insists that the authentic "more than human" comes "not through a technological divinization, but through God's grace received in Christ" (Leo XIV 2026, no. 127). The encyclical thus locates true transcendence just where my argument locates the second nakedness, in a receptivity that is the opposite of sovereign self-assertion: "We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being" (Leo XIV 2026, no. 128).

We can now name the form of authentic human existence in the algorithmic age: the second nakedness. The phrase borrows from Paul Ricoeur's figure of the "second naïveté" (*seconde naïveté*)—the post-critical recovery of symbolic immediacy reached not by regressing to the pre-critical but by passing through critical mediation toward an interpretation that listens again (Ricoeur 1967, pp. 351–57; for the theological reception, Wallace 1995; Blundell 2010). As the second naïveté recovers what immediacy had lost only by passing through the labor of critique, so the second nakedness recovers creaturely transparency only by passing through the renunciation of sovereign self-assertion. It is therefore no nostalgic regression to primordial transparency, but an eschatological participation in Christ's kenotic form of life, expressed in the *hōs mē* of 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, where the believer uses the things of this world without being owned by them. It is a pure, naked use of life itself—a use that cannot be captured.

This kenotic posture clarifies what is at stake in the cultural mood often labeled "AI optimism." Recent governance discourse—the European Union's AI Act (European Union 2024), Pope Francis's G7 address (Francis 2024; cf. Smuha 2021)—has begun to name the inadequacy of merely technocratic frameworks. Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, devoted entirely to artificial intelligence, presses the point further: the issue "is not limited to regulation" (Leo XIV 2026, no. 5), since technological progress "requires careful discernment of the anthropological vision that guides it," lest the age yield "an increase in means without a growth in humanity: 'having more' without 'being more'" (Leo XIV 2026, no. 94). This deeper inadequacy, I want to suggest, is finally theological. The theological virtue of hope (*spes*) is not the cousin of optimism but its critic. Hope, in Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics, is grounded in the beauty of God's self-disclosure in the paschal mystery, a beauty that cannot be administered into being but only received (von Balthasar 1982, "Introduction: The Form of the Beautiful"). A cognate diagnosis frames the opening volume of his *Theo-Drama*, where the dramatic character of existence is defended against the modern "flight into the future," with its "eulogies of technological achievements" that "interfere with the natural balance while holding out no hope" of a genuine mastery of existence (von Balthasar 1988). Optimism, by contrast, projects an immanent trajectory: more compute, more capability, more managed satisfaction. It promises peace where Jeremiah heard only the false reassurance—"They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14). That is optimism's deeper inadequacy: it can extrapolate trajectories of capability, but it cannot teach the human creature how to dwell in vulnerability, in mourning, in waiting, the dimensions in which hope, and the beauty proper to hope, becomes possible at all.

It is from within this posture that a response to algorithmic governance can be uttered as personal address rather than counter-program. The Lazarus narrative discloses the responsive structure exactly. As Jesus approaches Bethany, Martha goes out to meet him

(John 11:20); their dialogue (personal, marked by grief and unfinished hope) comes before any miracle, and it is here that he addresses her directly: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). The word is offered not to a problem to be solved but to a person capable of grief, of waiting, of recognition. Only afterward, at the tomb, does the Gospel narrate the tear: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35), the shortest verse in the New Testament, in which the Word made flesh receives the wound of human mortality before he answers it. Address precedes both calculation and miracle; tears precede resurrection. The faith such a call elicits is not an output but a *kenosis*—the free acceptance of one’s own finitude as the very posture in which life can be received as gift. This is the one movement that AI, governed by the logic of accumulation, can never make, for it never waits.

What follows from this analysis is not a rejection of artificial intelligence but a discernment about its proper place in human life. Pope Francis insists that AI is fundamentally a tool, its meaning set by the ends to which human freedom directs it (Francis 2024); and Leo XIV’s *Magnifica Humanitas* likewise refuses to pose the matter as a simple “yes” or “no” to technology, framing it instead as the choice “between constructing Babel or rebuilding Jerusalem” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 9), with “standards for discernment” anchored first of all in “the dignity of the human person” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 14). The decisive question is therefore not whether AI is good or evil but whether the human person remains, before God and the other, the one who can be addressed and who must answer. The New Tower of Babel and the figure of the naked human turn out to be not two diagnoses but two faces of one theological insight: the apparatus’s logic of capture inverts the relational creatureliness in which the human is constituted as *imago Dei*. Read as a single arc, the stations of the argument converge: the autonomous signification of Babel and the bare life it exposes (Sections 2 and 3) name the apparatus’s foreclosure of the human; the dynamic *imago Dei*, the attention that consents to grace against gravity (Sections 4 and 5), and the diachronic time of address (Section 6) name the dimensions that foreclosure cannot reach; and the kenosis of Christ (Section 7) grounds them all as the one form of life no apparatus can simulate. The Babel-builders’ *na’āseh-lānû šēm* and the algorithmic apparatus’s extraction of digital traces alike refuse the asymmetry of the holy; both put a calculative totality in place of the address that summons the human to answer. Against this twofold foreclosure I have proposed the second nakedness as the kenotic form of authentic existence—a contemplative receptivity (Weil), an ethics of alterity (Levinas), and a christological self-emptying (Phil 2:5–11) by which the creature receives itself as gift rather than asserts itself as sovereign. *Imago Dei* is then not a possession but a posture: the disciplined poverty of attending to the One who calls each by name. This posture, though personal, is not individualist, and the encyclical’s own figure makes the connection precise. Against Babel *Magnifica Humanitas* sets not a solitary contemplative but Nehemiah’s Jerusalem—“a people who work together in the presence of God” (Leo XIV 2026, no. 9)—so that the alternative to the apparatus is, from the outset, communal. The personal kenosis described here is the precursor of that common labor, not its substitute: a community of mutual address can be built only of persons who have renounced the sovereign self-assertion that reduces the other to a resource, since otherwise the community merely rebuilds Babel with a shared vocabulary. Conversely, the second nakedness cannot be sustained alone. Receptivity is constitutively relational—one receives oneself from an Other only where address is answered—and so it lives from worship, common discernment, and mutual care. That the personal and the communal are not rivals is the burden of Wojtyła’s theory of participation. The person is fulfilled not in isolation but in acting “together with others,” so that participation is “closely associated with both the community and the personalistic value” (Wojtyła 1979, p. 295); and the two

distortions of common life—individualism, and the “totalism” that casts the individual as “the chief enemy of society and of the common good” (Wojtyła 1979, p. 274)—are alike failures to hold person and community together. The self-possession recovered in kenotic dispossession is therefore ordered from the outset to participation. The kenotic communities I have in view are accordingly not strategies of withdrawal but ordinary human spaces—of discernment, contemplative practice, sacramental consciousness—in which the goods of technology are placed at the service of love and the gift of life. What distinguishes them from a merely private digital asceticism is not abstinence but use: the *hōs mē* practiced together, a common use of things without appropriation. So received rather than absolutized, the very technologies that would build Babel might yet be turned toward the holiness of everyday human life, bearing witness against their own logic of accumulation to the gift they cannot themselves give, the gift in which God’s Name alone grounds and founds all human naming.

One final figure brings the argument to its close. The Babel builders resolve, “let us make a name for ourselves” (*na’āseh-lānū šēm*, Gen 11:4)—the self that would magnify itself by seizing a name no one has given. Its exact inverse is sung by Mary, whose soul “magnifies” (*megalynēi*) not herself but the Lord, receiving her vocation as gift from the One who “has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts” and “brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:46, pp. 51–52). There is a fittingness in it: the first encyclical to confront the age of artificial intelligence opens with the Tower of Babel and closes with the Magnificat, naming the self-emptying of the lowly as the place where true greatness appears (Leo XIV 2026, nos. 1, 243–45). And here the wager of this article reaches its term. The second nakedness is not diminishment but the only authentic *magnifica humanitas*—a humanity made great not by making a name for itself against the heavens, but by becoming small enough to receive its name, and its grandeur, from God alone.

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Notes

- ¹ Pope Leo XIV’s encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* opens its discernment of the age of AI with two biblical scenes (no. 7): the construction of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. Babel, for the encyclical, “reveals the limits of any effort that, however grandiose, arises from self-affirmation ... and aspires to reach heaven without God’s blessing” (no. 7), so that the fundamental alternative becomes one “between a power that claims to dominate the heavens and a people who work together in the presence of God” (no. 9). The present article was conceived and substantially drafted independently of, and prior to, the promulgation of the encyclical (15 May 2026); although its point of comparison differs (reading Babel against the algorithmic apparatus rather than against the Nehemiah narrative), it converges with the encyclical in interpreting the Tower of Babel as the emblem of a human pride that forgets God.

- ² Caliban and Ariel are, respectively, the brutish slave and the airy spirit in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; Ellul deploys the pair as a synecdoche for the moral extremes (the savage and the beautiful) that are not themselves to be identified with technique. Problematic, however, is *technique's* mechanism of subsuming them in its "closed world" (cf. Ellul 1964, pp. 93–94).
- ³ Biblical citations follow the English Standard Version (ESV) throughout, as the standard adopted for this study, except where otherwise indicated (NRSV for Eccles 2:11 and Wis 3:1 in Section 6).

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